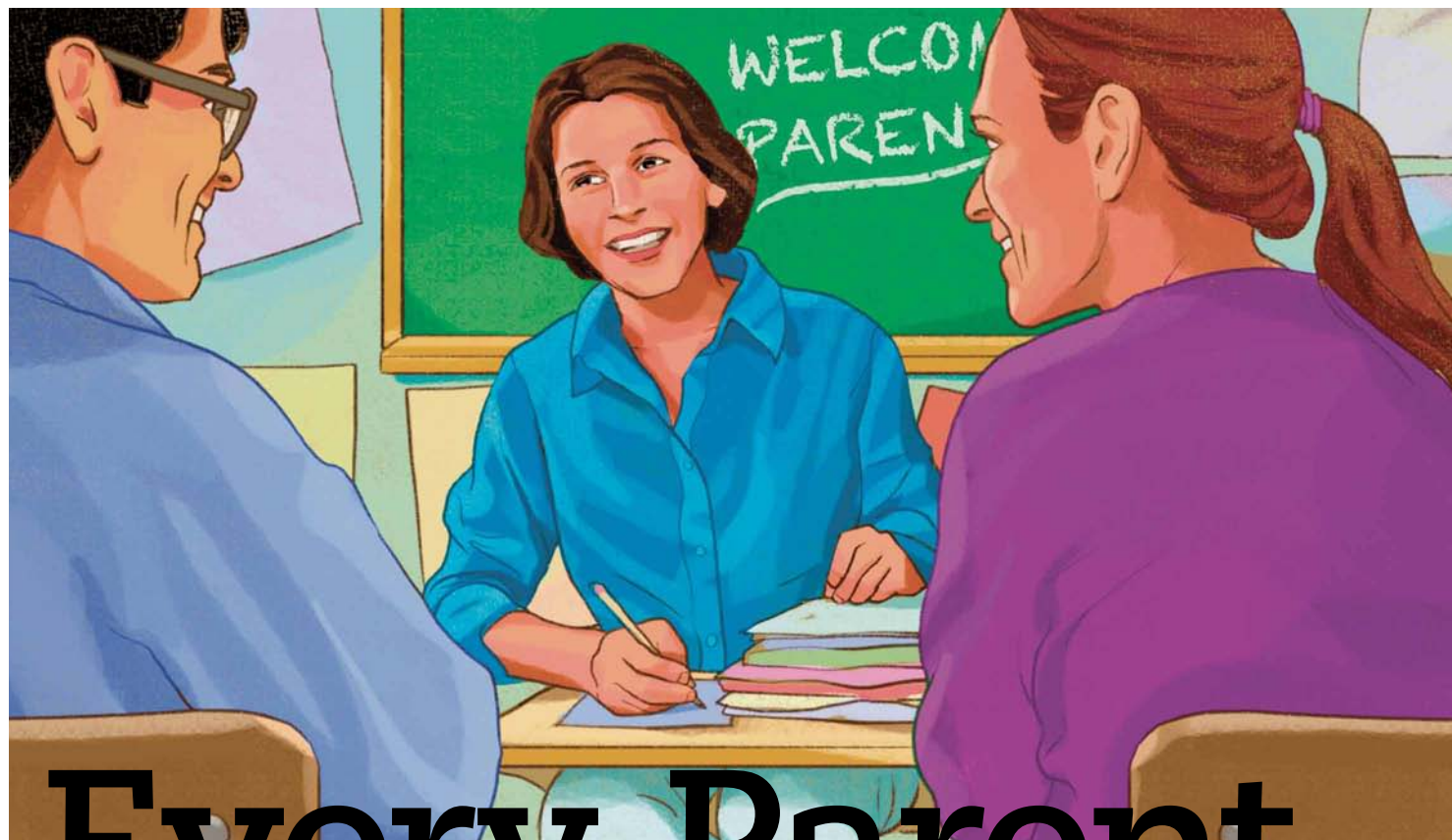


Get Along With



Every Parent

How to keep
it positive,
and keep the
volunteering
coming!

By Jennifer
Scoggin

Let me be real with you for a moment. Working collaboratively with every parent in my class has not always been all sunshine and kittens. Has creating a successful relationship always been a goal of mine? Yes. Have I ever wanted to snatch their cell phones away from their ears and smash them against a wall when we are in the middle of a conference? Sadly, also yes.

But for every parent who has shown up unannounced with a massive birthday cake and seemed confused when I was a) in the middle of teaching, b) unable

to magically produce a knife, candles, or matches and c) clearly plastering a pained smile on my face, there is a parent who sends thoughtful notes, is an active participant in her child's education, and is a pleasure to work with.

Bottom line: The more often and positively you communicate, the less likely you are to have grief down the line. Here are some of my ideas for working with all parents without adding hours to your day—from the ones who love to make a shouty phone call to the ones who dutifully return permission slips on time.

Stay Positive

Yes, we all have to call home sometimes when bad behavior rears its ugly head. However, don't let that be the only time you reach out to parents. Nobody wants a relationship with Ms. Debbie Downer. Don't let them live in fear you'll call—reach out just to say everything's cool.

Phone Home

Make it your goal to place at least one positive call home per week. Try putting it on your calendar as a reminder. Not only will it brighten the day of the receiving family, it will make your week a little brighter, too. Keep track of whose parents you've called and make it a point to contact every family throughout the year—even the parents whose kid never stops moving. You appreciate his energy, right?

Get a Notebook

Don't forget to keep careful track of your interactions with parents. Create a quick Parent Communication Log that includes the date, name of the family member, type of communication, and a brief summary of what you've discussed. This record will come in handy during report card time and in the event any sort of ruckus is stirred up.

Use Humor

Be ready with a funny anecdote or story of success about each one of your students. Good teachers are avid kid watchers. (Think bird watchers without the funny hats and binoculars.) When you run into a parent, be ready to share your observations and wow them with how well you know the child. Naturally, parents are curious about what their kids are like when they are at school. And after all, the students tell you *all* about life at home—My sister's grounded 'cause she stayed out late.

Begin With Compliments

Always start face-to-face conversations with a compliment. Parents will listen better when they feel you are acknowledging their child as a whole person. Let's say you have a child who needs extra help in reading. You might say, "I've loved having Sasha this year. She's so analytical, and that makes her a great math student. But it can make the more abstract tasks in reading a challenge." Take a moment to honor a child's strengths before diving into difficult conversations.

Write Love Letters

Involve your class in sending home positive notes about the good things happening in your classroom. One way is to take five minutes at the end of the day to choose one student to recognize and to collaboratively compose a note or e-mail detailing how that student set an example for those around him. Systematically work your way through the entire class, building positive self-esteem as you go! Can you say "two birds with one stone"?

Share Your "Top Ten" Lists

Many parents are looking for ways to help their children at home. Share your favorites. Once a month or so, send home a list of fabulous books to read, or websites to visit (eagle webcam!), or online math games to play.



ILLUSTRATION: ZINA SAUNDERS



Be Inclusive

Give parents a variety of opportunities to get involved. Don't make assumptions about parents' level of involvement. Talk about a slippery slope! Instead, provide a range of options that meet the needs and availability of different families.

Have Story-Time Special Guests

Invite parents to share a favorite book from their own childhood or a current kid favorite with your class. To keep this option manageable, establish a day and time that consistently works for your schedule. Provide parents with tips for reading aloud, such as speaking slowly and stopping to ask questions.

Get 'Em in the Field

Because both working and stay-at-home parents may want to chaperone a field trip, send home dates as soon as possible. Be clear about responsibilities so that parents know what they are getting into and how much time they can commit.

Send Thank-You Notes

Let's not forget our manners in the frenzy of the school week! When a parent makes a contribution to the class, send home a personal thank-you note. Or if you're feeling extra fancy, have the class or a group of students create and write personalized thank-you notes. Your appreciation will go a long way!

Be the Teacher

Let's face it. Sometimes your students like to see a different face sitting in your chair. Keep it fresh and invite parents to share their hobbies or knowledge with your class. They may totally reenergize a unit of study!

Survey Families

Try to get to know the parents of your students as people. Find out where they're from, what their family is like, what they're interested in, or what they're most concerned about. Don't like the idea of a survey? Share a bit of yourself with them in a letter and invite them to write back.

Ask to Receive

Send home a wish list of items to be donated. Make it clear that these items are in no way a requirement. However, there are parents who may not be able to make it to the classroom but still want to contribute something.

KEEP THE LINES OPEN

While it is wonderful to aim high, don't back yourself into a corner and create a system of communication that unnecessarily clogs up your to-do list and makes you want to run screaming from the building. Find the system that works best for you.

► PROVIDE MONTHLY HIGHLIGHTS

Send home a simple newsletter. Keep parents posted on important dates and upcoming units of study. You can also include student work, class celebrations, and a wish list ("We need those toilet-paper tubes"). Keep it simple—use a template and digital photographs to spice things up.

► **MAKE IT COLORFUL** Put important communication on brightly colored paper. Kids' backpacks can be a scary place, filled with last week's snack, long-lost papers, and old gym clothes. Bright yellow or pink paper will help your permission slips and notes home stand out in the chaos.

► **BUILD A HOMEPAGE** Take advantage of classroom websites. Many schools have user-friendly formats for creating a class page. Post classroom rules, homework assignments, photographs, or anything else you want to share with parents.

► **TRY BLOGGING** Incorporate student blogging into at least one long-term project this year. Not only can you check for comprehension, but families can get a peek into the learning process.

► **INVOLVE YOUR STUDENTS** On Friday afternoons, you might invite students to write a short e-mail to their parents about what they learned that week. It's a great way to start the conversation at home. □